

Brother Giovanni's Reward

BY J. SACKVILLE MARTIN.

Brother Giovanni stood before the great unfinished canvas that was to grace the wall above the high altar of the monastery chapel. His palette and his brushes lay idly beside him while he stared at the painting with eyes that did not see it, being far beyond in visions of glory, of which he had caught but a faint reflection. Yet that reflection was very beautiful. Here was set out the crucifixion of Our Lord in a manner feeling enough to convert both Turk and Saracen. The good brother's eyes wandered from the infinite tenderness of the central figure to the two thieves crucified on either hand; thence to the group of weeping women about the foot of the cross; and then to a few strongly drawn lines in charcoal in the left hand corner of the painting, which showed where the work was still incomplete.

Although but a humble monk, Giovanni was held in high esteem both by the Abbot and the brethren of the little monastery of Santa Cascione. These held it firm as an article of faith that none other in all Italy could paint as he could. It was useless to speak to them of Firenze and of Botticelli; equally useless to talk of Rome and of Raphael. They were simple men who had not seen these things. Neither did they wish to see them; for had they not Giovanni's works?—and it was beyond question that these were beyond compare.

All things considered, Giovanni might have been excused had he been puffed up with his fame. It was the more merit to him, therefore, that he showed no sign of being so. He was ever the same—a simple, kindly, brown-eyed man, somewhat inclined to stoutness through much sitting at his work, of little use in the practical affairs of life, and so forgetful of his comfort that at times it was necessary to drag him from his canvas to the refectory for his frugal meals.

As his eyes travelled downward into the unfinished corner of the picture his face took on an expression of distress, and he awoke from his day-dream with a murmur.

"Alas! I can never do it!" he cried. "What do I know of such men, or whom can I take as my model? Nay, but to find him I should have to go forth into the world and into the abode of thieves and murderers. And how can I do that? The picture will never be finished, any more than it will be finished when his lordship comes to see it this afternoon."

His distress was deep indeed; for only that very morning the Abbot Paolo had called him to his own apartment after matins and he had informed him that the Lord Bishop of Perugia was passing through the monastery on his way to Firenze, bringing letters from the Holy Father himself to Lorenzo de Medici, and to his guest, Galeazzo Sforzi, Duke of Milan.

"It is useless," he sighed; "I cannot do it." He gathered his brushes slowly together, and went to the refectory for his midday meal.

The afternoon found him again be-

fore his canvas, yet making no further progress with it. Beyond the large window the sun shone hotly on the green lawn of the courtyard. He stood at the window looking out at it vaguely, busied rather with his thoughts than with the scene before him, so that he started as a procession of monks, headed by the Abbot and a richly dressed stranger, came across the grass in the direction of his room. One glance at the magnificent ecclesiasticism of the visitor's garb told him that this could be no other than the Lord Bishop of Perugia, a powerful prince of the church and on terms of intimacy with the Pope himself.

He rose and bowed low as the cortege entered his room. When he raised his eyes again to the Bishop's face, he remained staring at it as though it were a vision sent to him from heaven itself.

Yet it was scarcely a prepossessing countenance. The Lord Bishop was immensely tall. Beside him, the stout, rubicund visage of the Abbot Paolo gave one the impression of a buffoon in attendance upon a giant. The Bishop's head was bald, save for a scanty ring of sandy hair encircling his tonsure. His eyes were pale blue and shifty, save when they fixed themselves on some definite object, in which case they were apt to look a trifle malignant. Above them, the long, shaggy eyebrows were of the same sandy color as his hair. His nose was large and fleshy, and his lips shut tightly together like a steel trap, parted in one place alone by a projecting yellow tooth. Upon the left hand side of the face, just below his mouth, a large mole disfigured his chin, giving rise to half a dozen strong sandy hairs. Brother Giovanni stared at him as though he were unable to remove his eyes.

"Ay," said the Lord Bishop, raising his jewelled fingers by way of benediction. "So this is the picture?"

He gazed at it steadily and made the sign of the cross upon his breast. "You have wrought well, my brother," he said, fixing his eyes sternly upon Giovanni. "Yours is indeed a wonderful talent, and it behooves you to see that you use it worthily. Such art is in itself a religion. Yet tell me," he continued, scanning the picture narrowly, "what figure do you propose placing here where you have left the canvas imperfect?"

"If it pleases your lordship," stammered Fra Giovanni, nervously, "it was my intention to depict here the accused Iscariot chaffering with the Jews for his pieces of silver. He shall be shown holding out his hand while he glances furtively over his shoulder at the cross, as though fearing that he should meet with miraculous destruction."

"It is well thought of," said the Bishop, gravely, "a striking conception, indeed. Wherefore is it not yet finished, as is the rest of the picture?"

"Alas, my lord!" said Giovanni, "there were difficulties in the way. Yet now I may promise that it shall not be long before it is completed."

"See that it is so," said the Bishop. "Work worthily and reverently at your craft, my brother and do not misuse the talent that hath been vouchsafed to you. So shall you surely meet with your reward—not in silver or gold, as do the artists of the world, but in a manner fitting the work you shall accomplish and proportionate to the zeal with which you do it."

He raised his fingers once more in benediction and departed with his companions, leaving Giovanni standing staring after him. The poor brother's head was spinning with frightful thoughts. He had made no progress with his Judas, because, being surrounded solely by men of faith and holy living, he had had no model. Well, was not the Lord Bishop a holy man? and yet that nose, those shifty, blue eyes, that hideous mole! If these were not proper to Iscariot, then what features could fit him? With a shudder he hid his face in his hands to shut out the vision. Then, flinging his brushes down, he fled to his cell and shut himself in to struggle against temptation.

In the clear light of a summer evening, the Lord Bishop and his train set out for Firenze. From the window of his cell Brother Giovanni watched them depart. Far on into the night he tossed restlessly upon the plank that formed his couch. At midnight he could bear it no longer, and, seizing a horn lantern, he hurried guiltily from his cell to the painting room. Desperately he worked by the feeble rays of the lantern until the face of Iscariot stood out hideously, with pale sandy hair and shifting eyes, and a mole upon his chin. Almost he feared to look upon it himself. It was like—horribly like!! With a shudder, he dashed his brush at the face and obliterated all that he had done.

During the next few days, Brother Giovanni went about the monastery pale and preoccupied. The great work made no progress, for he could not touch it. He was obsessed by a vision of the Bishop's face. He knew now that no other Judas was possible for him; he knew that he would have to paint it, and he trembled at the knowledge.

On the fifth day he could keep away no longer. He fell to his work with feverish eagerness. One thing, and one thing only, he would do. He would replace the scanty hair with thick and matted red locks. Possibly that would be a sufficient disguise. And he would leave out the mole, too—if he could. He worked as a starving man eats—without stopping; and Judas grew hideously once more upon the canvas.

The good Abbot Paolo watched him with perplexity.

"It reminds me," he said vaguely, scratching his head, "it reminds me of some one—yet of whom I cannot tell."

The brethren thought the same. They gathered in little groups before the picture, endeavoring to recall whom the face of Judas resembled. None of them, however, penetrated the disguise of the thick, matted hair. And the mole was not there, though Fra Giovanni had long made up his mind that Judas had had just such a mole, and his fingers itched to put it on.

At length one morning he could resist the temptation no longer, and with a few vicious dabs of umber, the

mole stood revealed. Barely had he finished it when the abbot hurried in with joy upon his face.

"My brother," he cried, "hast thou finished thy picture? The Lord Bishop returns this way from Firenze today, and will arrive in the afternoon. He is certain to wish to see it; and doubtless he will reward thee, my son, according to thy deserts."

"Yes," said Giovanni, quietly, "it is finished."

The abbot departed joyfully, too full of his preparations for his guest's reception to glance at the canvas. But Giovanni stared at it dismally.

"He will know it," he murmured; "he cannot but recognize it."

It would be so easy to alter the face. A few dabs of paint would at least obliterate the mole. Yet as poor Giovanni looked at his work he knew it was impossible.

"I will not!" he cried, raising his hands. "Thus was Judas, and no otherwise. I will not do it!"

In the afternoon the Lord Bishop came over the hills with a numerous retinue. When he had washed and partaken of some slight refectory, he expressed a wish to see the picture.

Many of the brethren, proud of Fra Giovanni's skill, accompanied him. Like bees, they clustered about the canvas, leaving, however, a space wherein the good abbot and his guest might move.

The Lord Bishop of Perugia looked long and steadily at the picture. Then he turned his eyes toward Giovanni, who stood beside it, sick with fear. There could be no doubt now whom Judas resembled. Not one of the monks could miss the likeness when the model stood before them. They fell to whispering together, marvelling that they had not seen it before. And ever as he looked the Bishop's scowl increased, and with the scowl the resemblance grew stronger.

"Thou hast wrought well," he said at last, turning toward Giovanni. "Thou hast well employed the talent that hath been granted upon thee. Indeed, indeed," he went on, punning with vicious pleasantry, "thou hast not hidden it in a napkin. Therefore, as I did prophesy to thee, thou shalt surely meet with thy reward—not in gold or silver, my brother, but in a manner fitting to the work which you have accomplished and the zeal with which you accomplished it. Myself and your good Abbot will confer upon the matter."

He turned and left the room, followed by the Abbot and the whispering monks, and once more Giovanni was left alone with his picture.

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That same evening in the chapter house, Brother Giovanni received his reward, and in good measure. A couple of sturdy brethren stripped him and, placing him face downward upon the floor, laid on him lustily with a raw cowhide until he bellowed again. Ninety for a month the process was repeated; so that long afterward the peasantry of those parts, when they could hear the wolves howl in the forests at night, would laugh by their firesides, and say:

"Pish! 'tis but Brother Giovanni receiving the reward of the talent that hath been granted to him."

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Moral: Even in the days before commercial competition, Art for Art's sake did not always pay.—The Sketch.